

CO-OPERATION AND LINKS BETWEEN DEVE- LOPED AND DEVELOP- ING COUNTRIES IN THE FIELD OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Books serve as links between people. The importance of the printed word in promoting peace and understanding in the world cannot be denied. In recognition of this fact, the UNESCO has underlined the importance of the written word for the progress of civilization and the result of this international awareness has had a salutary effect on the promotion of books around the globe.

The proliferation of books in developed countries has also resulted in an increase in the number of titles written specifically for children and adolescents. The increase in children's books has come about with the realization that literature for the young has its own values and rules and poses problems which are not always the same as those of adult literature.

International cooperation in the field of children's literature has grown considerably in recent years and this exchange has been based on what children are in a position to grasp and understand. Obviously, such an exchange requires an understanding of books which relate to the reading skills, reading interests and reading habits of the young. Thus, in creating links and cooperation between developed and developing countries, there is a need to examine factors which determine the reading interests of children and young people. These would include the children's reading ages or development stages.

Five reading stages have found general acceptance in developed countries regarding the reading phases children pass through at various stages in their maturation. These include the picture-book stage, the fairy tale stage, the factual reading phase or the environmental story stage. This is followed by the adventure story stage and finally the years of maturity or the "literary-aesthetic sphere of reading development." Other variables which determine reading interests and therefore merit consideration in international cooperation in children's literature are effects of gen-

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der, socio-economic status, education, language factors and the availability of reading books.

Developed countries need to share their craft knowledge regarding reading scales with lesser developed nations. It should be realized that the juvenile books are often too difficult for the readers. Efforts must be made to keep the readability of books in developing countries commensurate with a child's reading age. Studies indicate that not only is the readability of children's books difficult in developing nations, but the unimaginative and didactic content of children's books is often the reason for unenthusiastic readership amongst the young.

A popular way of creating links amongst countries is through the exchange of books. As was articulated in the 19th Congress of the International Board of Books in Nicosia, Cyprus, in 1984, there are many obstacles to be overcome before exchange of books can be beneficial to nations. Very often, differences in physical environment, social and cultural values and religious beliefs make translated books quite inaccessible to children in recipient countries. For this reason, it is important that while using translation as a means of creating links between developed and developing countries, the exchange be done on the basis of data on the reception of juvenile books (i.e. children and young people find literature appealing which corresponds to their psychological development and which allows for identification or projection). Only by keeping this knowledge in practice can books be promoted purposefully and international exchange in children's literature become successful.

Exchange of translated books can be a purposeful exercise when it is conducted in a meaningful way, as was illustrated by a study conducted by the UNESCO in 1969 in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Hun-

gary and Spain. The aim of the study was to discover the books which were most widely read in all these countries and to investigate whether these books had common subjects or themes with regard to translation. The results indicated that one-third of the most widely read books in all countries were translations. Moreover, many of the more widely read translations were the same in the countries.

International exchange of books is often hampered by the modalities of exchange. These sometimes include the high costs of shipping and customs restrictions. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the recipient country would be able to make the exchanged books available to the reading public. Developing countries need to anticipate these difficulties and work around them in order to facilitate the exchange of reading material for the young.

In most developing societies, there are a large number of young readers who have recently acquired literacy. There is usually a paucity of reading material for such readers. Research indicates that neo-literates lapse into illiteracy when deprived of opportunities of reading and writing at their appropriate level. Developing countries, therefore, must acquire assistance and expertise from nations that have developed reading material for the neo-literates, with its accompanying requirement of a carefully controlled vocabulary.

In developing links and co-operation between developing and developed countries, efforts must be made to encourage reading of children's literature by the handicapped child. The reading interests of handicapped children must be investigated in order to encourage readership amongst them in all countries. A positive beginning has been made by the UNESCO with the publication of "THE ROLE OF CHILDREN'S BOOK IN INTEGRATING HANDICAPPED CHILDREN INTO EVERYDAY LIFE."

Often, the recipients of exchange in books for the young are required to read in a second language. It is therefore essential that developing countries give special consideration to the requirements of reading in a second language. Factors that effect reading comprehension in a second language have hardly been taken into account by research in developing countries. Activities and measures need to be accelerated in developing countries to help children read in a second language.

International cooperation through conferences, seminars and symposia will allow a greater sharing of craft knowledge amongst the countries of the world on the writing and illustrating of children's books. Priority should, however, be given to conducting studies in developing countries in order to investigate the reading habits and interests of children. Developing nations often lack the resources and initiative to carry out such research. They should, therefore, be included in international studies on reading in order to gain cross-cultural insights into writing for the young.

Children's literature in developed societies has shown in its evolution one of the most notable traits of literature itself—its link with life. In developing nations, where writing for the young is a sporadic and infrequent activity, study of the development of children's literature in developed countries would only pave the way for the meaningful growth of the genre. When Western societies were passing through periods of ideological and religious control, there was a tendency towards didacticism in children's books. Children's books at such times often depicted characters who expressed adult values in every aspect of "their carefully controlled lives and deaths."

"Heaven," Wordsworth claimed, "lies about us in our infancy." This sentimental and revolutionary view of childhood was first expressed on behalf of the children of

the new middle class created by the Industrial Revolution who became the new wave of readers in England. It is therefore obvious that writing for the young develops with a relative amount of economic prosperity with its concomitant increase in education and reading. Developing nations which are impatient with the lack of growth in juvenile literature in their midst must ponder over this fact. In poor economies, childhood is a short-lived experience. Children are amalgamated into the work force early. The distinction between childhood and adulthood is indiscernible. Books that exist for adults are considered suitable for readers of all ages.

Developing countries also need to realize the issues that arise with the advancement of children's literature. In developed countries, where a great number of books are being written for children, a large number of children are no longer reading "the same few titles," a situation which has resulted in "a concomitant loss of shared childhood experience." Such a proliferation has also had an influence on the nature of the books published. Sometimes, the size of the market also encourages commercialism and mediocrity.

Contemporary children's literature in developing countries is permeated with the adult demand for openness in dealing with children. This has resulted in a thematic concentration on the "problem novel," which encourages reading for the young on divorce, alcoholism, sex, racism—issues that match society's concerns in a narrow sense, as did religion and morality in children's books for the Puritans in the middle of the 19th century. The development of this post-Freudian outlook has resulted in the replacement of religion "by the doctrine of existentialism", and morality "by psychology." Instead of the "bad child" or the "good child," the "problem" novel in contemporary children's writings focuses

on the "alienated child, the abused child, the retarded child, at any rate a child defined by the terminology of pain." There is a need for children's writers to be aware of this trend in writing and guard against it.

Thus, writers of children's books, while depicting reality in contemporary times, must also ensure that "the essence of children's literature, the traditional values of imagination and style," are not lost along the way. Writers for the young should perhaps gain inspiration from the statement

issued by the IBBY during the International Year of the Child in 1979, where it was observed that children need books that stretch their imagination, books that present a variety of cultural groups in a positive and non-stereotyped manner; books that prepare children to live harmoniously in this world; books that recognize the value of cultural differences and yet emphasize that many things are shared by all humankind and "foster a concern for the earth, the single planet on which we all live together."